YouthAction Community Leadership Course
Family Homelessness

Citizens’ Committee for Children’s (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City’s public and private schools. CCC is an independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this ten-week advocacy training program, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on Family Homelessness in New York City. Students interviewed experts in the field, conducted site visits to various shelters and service providers, and met with advocates for homeless families. The following is a summary of the group’s findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

Safe and Appropriate Shelter Settings
Currently, 22,000 children are living in New York City Department of Homeless Services shelters. The average stay for families in shelter is over 400 days, and many families experience homelessness more than once. Many families are placed in shelters far away from their home communities, and it is common for them to also be moved from shelter to shelter. Currently, about half of homeless families in the shelter system are living in hotels or cluster sites and we learned these types of settings often do not meet the basic needs of families and children. The other half reside in Tier II family shelters, some of which house too many families or do not receive adequate resources to provide the level of support needed to help families stabilize and move into permanent housing. These factors make it difficult for families to maintain and/or forge community bonds and relationships.

- We support the Mayor’s plan to phase out cluster sites and hotels and increase the number of Tier II Shelters for homeless families.
- We recommend that all families entering shelter be placed as close to their home community as possible.
- We recommend that all sites housing homeless families provide areas for cooking, laundry, community activities, and social interaction.
- We recommend that all homeless children in shelter under age 5 be eligible for subsidized child care and that there are staff at all shelters (including hotels) to provide families with assistance in locating child care providers in the community.
- We recommend that shelter staff become knowledgeable about after-school programs located in the community and help families enroll their children in after-school and summer camp programs.
- We recommend that all family shelters implement job training and income building programs to help families gain the tools to end the cycle of homelessness.
Access to Care and Services
Homelessness is traumatic, and often times the stressors and events that cause a family to become homeless have been traumatizing as well. 42% of school-aged homeless children experience depression. Children in shelters are more likely to develop diabetes, asthma, heart disease, and other chronic illnesses which may be exacerbated by conditions in the shelters. These factors contribute to a greater need for health and mental health services in shelters.

- **We recommend** that all shelter staff be trained in using a trauma-informed approach to working with homeless children and families.
- **We recommend** that all family shelters either have onsite health and mental health services or ensure that families can access services in the community or at the Floating Hospital.

Educational Supports
Only about half of New York City students who enter homeless shelters are placed in shelters in the same borough as their school. 53% of students living in homeless shelters are chronically absent, missing an average of over 40 school days per year.

In addition to the 22,000 children who live in shelters, there are more than 85,000 who live in other types of temporary housing, such as doubled up with friends or family. This means that 1 in every 7 elementary school students has experienced homelessness.

Students in all kinds of temporary housing demonstrate poor educational outcomes; only 12% are proficient in math and 15% are proficient in reading. 10% of homeless students in middle and high school are suspended.

- **We recommend** that the City ensure that parents receive monthly MetroCards (rather than weekly) to help transport children to elementary school and pre-kindergarten until transportation/busing can be arranged.
- **We recommend** that the Department of Education establish a Deputy Chancellor for Highly Mobile Students.
- **We support** the FY19 increase in funding for after-school literacy programs at shelters and **recommend** an increase in funding for after-school programs and academic support for schools with high percentages of homeless students.
- **We support** the FY19 addition of 10 DOE school-based social workers for students in shelter, bringing the total number to 53. **We recommend** increasing the number to 100.
- **We recommend** the addition of 50 DOE shelter-based social workers to help families with education-related issues.